

Bibles, bombs and the spectre of Wiebo Ludwig

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Body

This one-act play is inspired by the true story of Wiebo Ludwig, the fundamentalist Christian leader in Alberta who famously battled with oil and gas companies and the Canadian government about the disastrous effects of resource extraction on the land and his people.

Ludwig is not named in the play, but the creative team acknowledges that it's based on his story, and plot points will be recognizable to those who followed this high-profile saga.

Under Richard Rose's direction, the Tarragon Theatre's design team creates an intimate and beautiful environment.

In Curtis Wehrfritz's set design, stripped-back hemlock saplings hang from the ceiling along two walls of the Extraspace and a central table is built with the same wood.

Jason Hand's lighting is warm and indirect, so that when beams of light sometimes shoot into the playing area, it feels disruptively violent - civilization impinging on nature. John Gzowski's sound design, too, emphasizes the foreignness of technology to the family's compound: when Dad (Layne Coleman) makes phone calls, there's no physical handset or visible microphone, and yet his voice is eerily amplified and distorted.

Maria Milisavljevic's play is in part about the paradoxical tragedy of nature turning against a community who were attempting to live in harmony with it.

The apocalyptic image of water igniting when a match is held over it is haunting: "The water is on fire!" repeats Dad over and over again in an early scene.

Ludwig believed that the water, air, and land in and around his homestead was tainted as a result of sour gas extraction, and undertook a campaign of eco-terrorist vandalism against the gas companies. The paradox of a faith community resorting to violence is also on Milisavljevic's agenda, as underlined in the opening scene in which the family reads from the Bible and builds a bomb on the same table.

Another paradox offered up by this story is that of exploited turned exploiter, something articulated late in the play by the son Joe (Benjamin Sutherland), who accuses Dad of making the family pawns in his increasingly high-profile campaign.

Should Dad/Ludwig have prioritized their safety and just left the area? Was he fighting for something bigger (the Canadian dream of harmony with nature, exposure of the destructive effects of capitalism), or had he become infatuated with his media image?

These complex questions align the figure with Stockmann, the (anti?)-hero of Ibsen's *The Enemy of the People*, which Milisavljevic translated and Rose directed with considerable success for Tarragon in 2014 and 2015.

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Milislavljjevic attempts here to move beyond Ibsenite naturalism through poetic, non-linear dramaturgy, but the experiment does not really bear fruit. These multiple paradoxes are presented on the level of dialogue and theme, but they compete with each other confusingly.

On the levels of structure and tone, the play circles and splutters and never really gets going.

Initially, conflict with powers-that-be dictates the action, but remains offstage; too late in the game, the conflict turns interfamilial, but by this point, Dad is comatose and unable to respond to Joe's accusations.

Rose directly implicates the audience by having Mom (Janet Laine Greene) angrily show the picture of her stillborn grandson to us - "He died. And it's your fault. You did this" - but this agitprop gesture confuses by adding yet another stylistic layer.

The emphasis on esthetic attractiveness adds a further distraction, in that the characters' rustic clothes overlap a bit too closely with today's hipster eco-chic.

Sutherland's stylish collarless tee and wool jacket, and the Fluevog-like pumps worn by Green and Sarah Sherman (as adult daughter Jemima) could place us in Trinity Bellwoods when the characters are meant to be living a spartan existence in the Alberta backwoods.

The absence of clearly articulated conflict and the overriding tone of stress and anxiety give the actors very few notes to play.

A further confusion is that the time period seems to move back and forth to Joe and Jemima's childhood, but these shifts happen so quickly that they're hard to perceive.

The attempt here to craft a drama about a complex socio-political situation without taking a predictable "issue play" format is noble, but does not fully succeed.

Peace River Country

(out of four)

By Maria Milislavljjevic, directed by Richard Rose. Until March 19 at Tarragon Theatre, 30 Bridgman Ave. Tarragontheatre.com or 416-531-1827.

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